



Salon. Domestication of Warsaw's Public Space

I

Warsaw is home to 7% of Poland's population. This is relatively low compared to other capital cities. For instance, in the case of Paris, this ratio stands at 18%, for London it is 22%, for Tokyo it is 28%, and for Beirut it is 42%.¹ Despite the small percentage of the population that actually lives in the city, Warsaw keeps stirring highly ambivalent emotions amongst Poles. These sentiments reveal that Warsaw is first and foremost a capital, and only then a city. In order to fully appreciate Warsaw's place in the Polish imagination, we need to transcend both its spatial and functional boundaries and reach beyond, where very few scholars of Warsaw peek.

"I come from a place where everybody is a nobody," recalled Dorota Masłowska, a writer born in 1980 in a small town on the Baltic littoral. "Warsaw for me is a city where the most important thing is being cool. People live their lives in order to get some kind of title they can put in front of their names—like an doctor, engineer, director, CEO, the girl from *Polityka* magazine ... When I was a kid, cars with Warsaw number plates (also distinguished by lowered windows and loud music) passed through. They ran over small animals and left us covered in dust. Like noblemen amongst the peasantry."²

She is not the only person who, having not grown up in Warsaw, has Warsaw-related childhood memories. Back in the thirties, wrote the activist Józefa Bogusz-Dzierżkowska in her diaries, "lords from Warsaw" frequented her home area, some 80 kilometers west to the city, for hunting.

"They brought large piebald dogs that we had never seen before." Those days, one could instantly distinguish rural from urban folk by their attire. "If only one dressed peasants as lords," she pondered as a child, "would they look the same? In the end, I concluded not: Varsovians are a different breed of people, just as they have dogs of a different breed."³

Grudges held against capital cities are universal. But Bogusz-Dzierżkowska's description of Warsaw, as if it were home to Poland's aristocracy, is *not* a metaphor. Warsaw is a city that has been fundamentally gentrified in the literal sense of the word. While in Western cities gentrification is a term often used to mean embourgeoisement,⁴ in Warsaw it means that its space has been sanitised of the vestiges of the

bourgeoisie and the working classes alike. Ancient régime seems to be very persistent in the Polish capital.⁵

This, however, does not mean that Poland is still a feudal society. Instead, it means that the historical Polish “lords versus peasants” relationship has reincarnated inside Warsaw’s urban fabric, and it stands for the relationship between Warsaw and the rest of the country. In other words, Poland’s gentry is no longer to be found *in* the palaces. It is the buildings *themselves* that are the contemporary equivalent of the aristocracy.

The rub is that these buildings are not actually very historical. “To walk south from the Old Town along Krakowskie Przedmieście”, writes David Crowley, “in the knowledge its buildings and monuments, or the paving stones on which you tread, are not much more than fifty years old is an odd experience.”⁶ How did this brand old (rather than brand new) city come about?

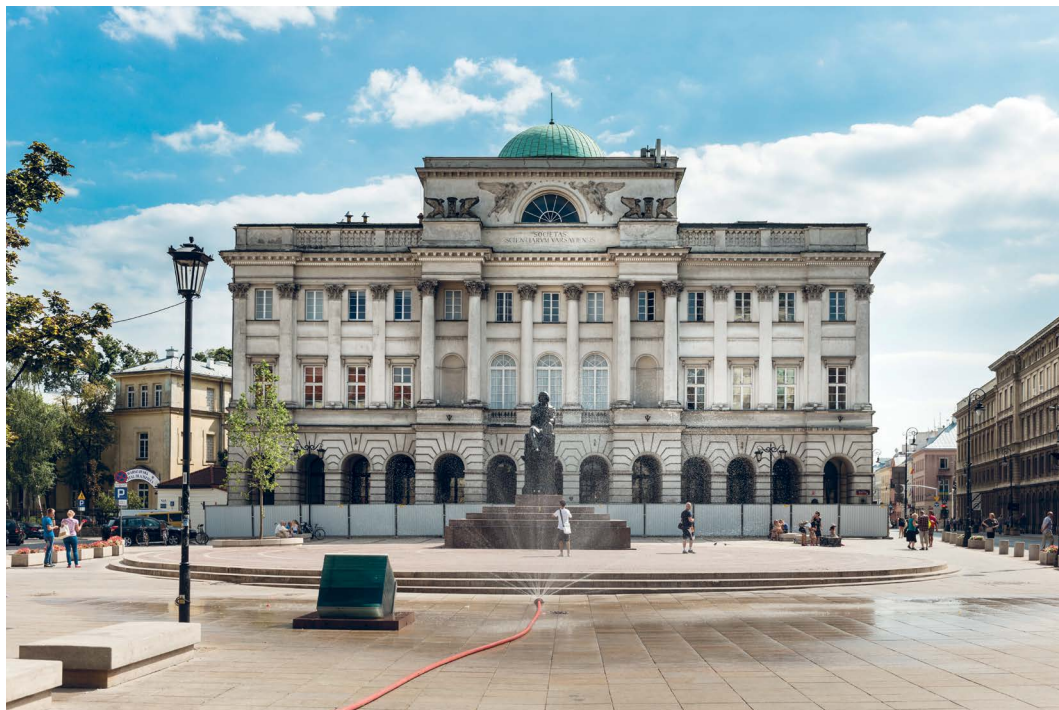
In the early 1944 Warsaw was less destroyed by the war than London, but almost a year later, due to the brutal clamping down of the Warsaw Uprising by the Nazis, the city’s material tissue was pulverised to ashes by some 70%, and its Old Town by 90%.⁷ During the very first post-war decade a massive national campaign of re-building Warsaw ensued. Bricks from cities as distant as Wrocław were brought in and used in the re-construction effort. Workers were asked to contribute to a special reconstruction fund and even “donated their labor,” i.e. were driven in from other cities to do construction work on Sundays.⁸

As a consequence of this collective effort, the Old Town was re-opened in the summer of 1953. And since everybody pitched in the reconstruction mobilisation, the national capital was deemed to be everybody’s city. Just as in socialist Tbilisi, Georgia, where back in the thirties people thought that the Moscow metro was literally “theirs,”⁹ the sense of collective ownership was quite genuine and ought not to be dismissed as mere propaganda.

Warsaw emerged from the war not only as a national property, but also as a true Polish capital—perhaps for the very first time in history. It is often said that in the past Poles had three capitals—one political, one symbolic, and one economic. So, in fact, they had none. Warsaw grew over the centuries as the place where the Polish kings were chosen by the enfranchised gentry during “free elections”. But these kings would be both crowned and buried in Kraków. And the real center of Poland’s economy was Gdańsk. So although Warsaw served as Poland’s capital city in the past, it was only after 1945 that its capital function became undisputed.

Consequently, the city became substantially bureaucratised. By 1970 the percentage of Warsaw’s





population employed in administration doubled as compared to the antebellum period.¹⁰ Although pre-war Warsaw used to be a compact city, the post-war reconstruction increasingly gave Warsaw a tessellated structure.¹¹ Before 1939 one could not find any separate government district.¹² Today Poland's most important national institutions are perched alongside the Royal Route: the seats of both the President and the Prime Minister, the Parliament, the Primate, the Stock Exchange, the University or National Gallery, and many other key Polish institutions are clustered together.

II

Witnesses to this transformation who remembered pre-war Warsaw lamented this new face of the city. The writer Kazimierz Brandys noted in 1958 that Warsaw's inner city:

"used to be a lively district, saturated with culture. It had literary coffee houses and bookshops both new and antique. Today, this is a district of dead office corridors. If one encounters a living soul over there, then this person is not interested in walking around but finding the office where they can get their things done."¹³ His brother Marian, also a writer, agreed. In Warsaw, according to him, "everything leads to an empty field. Warsaw hosts now a new type of a transient dweller, with no traditions. A human being is merely a part of the crowd, storming the city from the outside."¹⁴

The Brandys brothers felt alienated because the inner-city, that used to be the host of the intelligentsia, was taken over by the "anonymous crowd" and the "peasant-bureaucrat" (Polish: *chłopo-urzędnicy*). "A psychophysical type", according to Marian, "omnipresent on the street, in the store, in a restaurant, office or the university." By his own account, he used to stroll on Warsaw's main promenade, the Nowy Świat.

"I meet many acquaintances, or strangers who knew me. It made me feel 'at home.' One day, I noticed a difference. I thought that I was passing by the very same people all with the very same nondescript look. No familiar face. This is when I realised I am living in a different city. And I stopped going there."¹⁵

One of the most lamented objects of this nostalgia was a coffee house called Ziemiańska, which literally meant "a place of the landed aristocracy."¹⁶ It was not exactly so, but it was most definitely the most fashionable spot for cultural life before 1939.

The editor Mieczysław Grydzewski, for example, as described by Marci Shore in her book *Caviar and Ashes*,

would bring his two dachshunds to it. “In the summer, the café on Mazowiecka Street opened its garden, yet the place of honour remained a table poised on a platform protruding from the stairway.” According to Shore, the place where the most distinguished of the distinct would sit. She describes this world as very cosmopolitan and very parochial at the same time. The Warsaw elite, “who felt at home in Moscow, Paris, and Berlin” at the same time “suffered (sometimes advantageously, sometimes painfully) from a certain pathological narcissism. They sat at their café called Ziemiańska and believed, with absolute sincerity, that the world turned on what they said there.”¹⁷

Although places like these indeed vanished, one can argue that the entire post-war reconstruction turned Warsaw’s inner city into an ersatz Ziemiańska. Ziemiańska was the embodiment of the Polish idea of *salon*—meaning literally a living room, or an exhibition space, a place where important people rubbed shoulders. A place where they would be on very familiar terms and domestic with one another, but isolated from everybody else.

Another keyword that every Pole is familiar with is *Warszawka*—meaning miniature Warsaw, a word that is used by Poles to express their anger at Warsaw’s detachment, cronyism, and splendid isolation.¹⁸ For the Brandys brothers and their likes the old Warsaw was long gone. But for the “anonymous crowd”, who now visited Warsaw and treated the city as the capital of *their* nation-state, the entire city seemed like an open-air Ziemiańska. Not the elite cultural coziness of the Brandys’ what these crowds recognised, but a new type of exclusiveness.

III

The new socialist housing estates were based upon the premise of doing away with the messiness and the unexpectedness of street life. People from out-of-town, used to the pre-war urban structures in other cities, experienced in Warsaw a sense of spatial bewilderment. Warsaw neighborhoods “have no centers of their own. Everything dissolves”, wrote a journalist in 1963. This paradoxically buttressed the importance of the Old Town. “Thank God, we still have the Old Market Square. That’s where people swarm—as if this was a center. In the absence of a modern center—we need to get by with a medieval and a miniature one”.¹⁹ The new urban consciousness was not really based on the identification with the actual city but with the *image* of its historical center.

In the fifties and the sixties Warsaw’s Old Market Square was largely used as an *ad hoc* parking lot. Only by the end of the decade it was gradually taken over by tourists.

“New cozy cafeterias and small fancy restaurants mushroomed”, according to the writer Wallis. “An inexpensive diner (bar mleczny) and a number of groceries disappeared. A large underwear store (magazyn z bielizną) was turned into an art gallery. A basement club with chansonnier’s live performances was opened, as well as a high-end pastry and coffee shop. Then an upscale antique store, and a number of goldsmith, engraving and souvenir workshops. Traffic was nearly completely eliminated from the Old Town area, which was the crossover point in the way the public spaces of the Old Town, and especially of the Old Market Square, was used.”²¹

In the sixties life was breathed into something that resembled historical Disneyland. The Old Town was not really old. Not only because it was rebuilt. More importantly, it hardly resembled the city from before the war. Reconstruction of material elements of history was, as one art historian put it, was “not only for the connoisseurs but constituted a suggestive document of history for the masses”.²² Jan Zachwatowicz, one of the leaders of the reconstruction effort, noted in 1946 that “Warsaw cannot be like Łódź—a city with no past”.²³ The odd thing is that Łódź, unlike Warsaw, survived the war relatively unscathed, but because it was an industrial town and not a home of the Polish gentry,²⁵ it was considered outside of Polish national history. And this is why the *true* history had to be literally (re)created in Warsaw.

There was a deliberate policy of reconstructing only the buildings that pre-dated 1850.²⁴ As a consequence, those who today stroll down from the Old Town towards the Łazienki Park, experience a modern rendition of how the city looked like *before* the largest urban boom in Europe’s entire history.²⁵ So when walking down the Royal Route today, one will *not* see that the building on Krakowskie Przedmieście 19 (built in 1906) was six-storey high in 1946 and not three-storey, like today (see the photographs on pages 202 and 203). One will also *not* see that its façade used to be heavily ornamented. An adjacent building, now home to Kino Kultura, used to be neo-gothic and was likewise “tempered”. Now its walls are bland. The Staszica Palace, a little farther down the road (see the photographs on page 198), actually had a Byzantine-style onion-shaped dome and polychromatic tiles until 1950. Some buildings, like an *art nouveau* tenement on the corner of Aleje Ujazdowskie and Chopin Streets (Kamienica Spokornego), vanished soon after the war. The *art nouveau* building was replaced by a socialist-realist office building.²⁶ Others, like the Ujazdowski Castle, managed to shrug off unwanted history on their own.



"By some sheer stroke of luck," wrote an art critic in 1946, "during the war only the nineteenth century additions that corrupted the building's original shape were destroyed, and hence rebuilding of the castle in its eighteenth century form will not be difficult."²⁷ The Ujazdowski Castle was nonetheless demolished in 1954. The reconstruction started in 1974 and lasted a decade.

In a way, the reconstruction effort is still ongoing. The Old Town hall on the Teatralny Square was demolished in 1954 and reconstructed in 1997. It houses a bank now.²⁸ Another prominent eighteenth century building, the Temple of Divine Providence, that closes the Royal Route from the South, was slated but never rebuilt. Until 2002.²⁹

IV

But what was so unsettling about the nineteenth century that Warsaw had to be sanitised from all its traces?

The emergence of the working class and the bourgeoisie as the central agents of political, social and economic change (serfdom was officially abolished only in 1864) contributed to a generally chaotic, agile and unruly urban world.³⁰ Urbanisation was regarded as a threat by the Polish elites. Maria Dąbrowska, a leading intellectual, whose parents belonged to the impoverished landed gentry, put it bluntly:

"Polish culture originated exclusively in the countryside. Our cities (partially because they were not ours) nurtured only stinking scum." Urban people revealed to her indeed as "another race, cavemen—coarse, vulgar, with appalling manners and deprived of any metaphysics whatsoever."³¹

When Polish intelligentsia—like Maria Dąbrowska; heir to the nobility—obtained the chance to refashion Warsaw as they pleased, they opted for sanitizing the urban life-forms that they deemed ill-suited for the capital of a modern nation. They reconstructed Warsaw as both a capital of a socialist nation and as a quiet town through which they imagined the old nobility strutted down what is now called the Royal Route in their horse-wagons relatively unobstructed. "Relatively" because their carriages would often sink in mud and had to maneuver between large piles of manure.³² This part of history, however, was not reconstructed.

Warsaw's urban space was thus gentrified by extending a domestic category, the salon, onto the public space. The salon emerged as a protected place, where one could maintain and strengthen Polish civilisation. The home was considered in the nineteenth century "the temple of the homeland evicted from the streets and public squares." People felt that inside the home the Polish culture was

nurtured. It was a place where it survived the onslaught of the urban.³³

The domestication of Warsaw's space, obviously, did not unfold as smoothly as it was planned. In the nineteenth century, the Royal Route was a space full of street vendors, and, likewise, this was again the case during the Stalinist period and in the nineties.³⁴ During the post-war Stalinist period, Warsaw experienced a veritable "renaissance of the street".³⁵ Life in the ruins flourished and so did petty trade. The way these pockets of unruly urban resisted the "onslaught of reconstruction, that came from Aleje Ujazdowskie and Marszałowska Streets"—was brilliantly captured by Tyrmand, a writer. This is how he described Chmielna Street:

"Standing in the very heart of Warsaw, this street appears repulsive, with its narrow size, and appallingly squalid condition. Remarkably, however, it simultaneously presents a lively and charming atmosphere. As Chmielna Street was fortunate to have survived the war almost unscathed, ever since there has been scant likelihood of its renovation and so, for the past ten years it remained pretty much unchanged. Life milled around and seethed on its scarcely eorganised ruins, in battered tenements, in roughly redecorated houses, in uncluttered backyards and staircases. The onslaught of reconstruction encompassed neighbouring districts, but this very street persisted with its gloomy, whiteish ambience of peeled-off plaster. The old, flamboyantly decorated tenements of Warsaw's inner-city, full of phony affectations from the previous century ... seemed outlandishly expressive and stood out even more in this forlorn landscape, amongst the millions of tiny makeshift improvements and primitive alterations that have accrued here over the past decade. And life—the simple quotidian life more, than anywhere else, flourished in here, reathed in hey the heavy chests of ordinar people of Warsaw."³⁶

According to Tyrmand, the working class was already in the fifties nostalgic for the "life in ruins"—because this is where they would socialise free from the patronizing look of the elites.

So when Nowy Świat and the remainder of the Royal Route turned into a full-fledged elitist salon, it was a place that resembled more a catwalk rather than a public space, where one could socialise with strangers. And indeed—a sociological survey from 1960 showed that most middle-class inhabitants of Warsaw would socialise with others mainly at home, or, although less often, in coffee houses or bars. Only 8 per cent did that on the street.³⁷ The street lost their erstwhile function and became a little more

than an exhibition space. Thus the men who until today have been hanging out in front of tenement gates in neighborhoods such as Praga Północ, are custodians of a form of urban life that has been irreversibly lost and relegated to the rubbish heap of history by this very first wave of gentrification in post-war Poland.³⁸

1. I took the number of the cities metropolitan area population size, not the city proper. Source: Wikipedia.
2. Dorota Mastowska, *Pieszczołek warszawki*, *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Warszawa), issue of 11.11.2003.
3. Józefa Bogusz-Dzierżkowska, *Smak ziemi – smak życia* (Łódź: Astra, 2001), p. 10.
4. Neil Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 34–35.
5. To borrow a phrase from: Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York: Parthenon Books, 1981).
6. David Crowley, *Warsaw* (London: Reaktion, 2003., n.d.), p. 13.
7. Jerzy Kochanowski, ed., *Zbudować Warszawę piękną...: O nowy krajobraz stolicy (1944–1956)*, W Krainie PRL (Warszawa: Trio, 2003), pp. 220–221.
8. Padraic Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists, 1945–1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 121, 146.
9. Leif Jerram, *Streetlife: The Untold History of Europe's Twentieth Century*, Reprint edition (OUP Oxford, 2013), p. 47.
10. Błażej Brzostek, *Za Progiem: codzienność w przestrzeni publicznej Warszawy lat 1955–1970* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio, 2007), p. 18.
11. Grzegorz Węclawowicz, *Struktura przestrzeni społeczno-gospodarczej Warszawy w latach 1931 i 1970 w świetle analizy czynnikowej*, *Prace Geograficzne* nr 116 (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich - Wydawnictwo PAN, 1975).
12. Kochanowski, *Zbudować Warszawę piękną...*, p. 250.
13. Brzostek, *Za progiem*, 141–142.
14. Marian Brandys in: *Ibid.*, 152.
15. *Ibid.*, 393.
16. *Ibid.*, 142.
17. Marci Shore, *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw Generation's Life and Death in Marxism, 1918–1968* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 4, 10.
18. Kacper Pobłocki, *Class, Space and the Geography of Poland's Champagne (post)socialism*, in *Chasing Warsaw: Socio-Material Dynamics of Urban Change Since 1990*, ed. Monika Grubbauer and Joanna Kusiak (Frankfurt, Campus Verlag, 2012), pp. 269–89.
19. Brzostek, *Za progiem*, p. 389.
20. Kacper Pobłocki, *Prawo do miasta i ruralizacja świadomości w powojennej Polsce, in O miejskiej sferze publicznej: obywatelskość i konflikty o przestrzeń*, ed. Przemysław Pluciński and Marek Nowak, *Teoria i Praktyka*, t. 1 (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2011), pp. 58–59.
21. Wallis, *Informacja i gwar*, p. 152.
22. Kochanowski, *Zbudować Warszawę piękną...*, p. 36.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
24. Crowley, *Warsaw*, p. 86.
25. It lasted between 1850 and 1910, cf. Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 259.
26. Jerzy Stanisław Majewski and Tomasz Markiewicz, *Warszawa nie odbudowana* (Warszawa: DiG, 1998), pp. 76–78, 114–116.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 72.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 81–83.
29. Crowley, *Warsaw*, p. 89.
30. Andrew Lees and Lynn Hollen Lees, *Cities and the Making of Modern Europe, 1750–1914*, 1st ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
31. quoted in: Bronisława Kopczyńska-Jaworska, *Łódź i inne miasta [Łódź and Other Cities]* (Łódź: Katedra Etnologii Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1999), p. 31.
32. Jan Stanisław Bystroń, *Warszawa* (Warszawa: Państw. Instytut Wydawniczy, 1977), pp. 133–135.
33. Brzostek, *Za progiem*, p. 125.
34. Roch Sulima, *The Laboratory of Polish Postmodernity: An Ethnographic Report from the Stadium-Bazaar*, in *Chasing Warsaw: Socio-Material Dynamics of Urban Change Since 1990*, ed. Monika Grubbauer and Joanna Kusiak (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2012), p. 249.
35. Brzostek, *Za progiem*, p. 128.
36. Leopold Tyrmand, *The Man with the White Eyes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), p. 142. Since most descriptions of Warsaw city life have been omitted in the English translation of this novel, this quote is our own translation from the original.
37. Brzostek, *Za progiem*, p. 88.
38. More on this in: Kacper Pobłocki, *Knife in the Water: The Struggle Over Collective Consumption in Urbanizing Poland* [in:] *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Postwar Eastern Europe*, ed. Paulina Bren, Mary Neuburger, (New York: Oxford University Press 2012), pp. 68–90.